

Democracy: From Theory to Dictatorial Dyspraxia to Anarchist Eupraxia

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Abstract

In theory: Democracy is the “rule of the people by the people and for the people” (Lincoln, 1863). In practice: “Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few” (Shaw, 1903). This paper addresses the gap between democratic theory and practice by attempting to analyse “democracy’s crisis of meaning” (Trend, 1996:7). It examines the processes through which the theoretical ideal of rule by the people is despoiled to dictatorial practices, typified by regimes of democratic dictatorship arising from the authoritarian rule of representative forms of democracy resulting in the tyranny of the powerful, to regimes of dictatorial democracy arising from the totalitarian rule of global neo-liberal capitalism. These contradictions indeed suggest “more than a simple gap between theory and practice” (Trend, 1996:9) and demand a new praxis for democracy. Despite the hegemonic dyspraxia of these kleptocratic and corporatocratic regimes on both a local and global level, the eupraxia of anarchism through co-operative forms of self-governance offers a glimpse of hope for democratising democracy by closing the gap between theory and practice.

Keywords: *democracy, dictatorship, kleptocracy, corporatocracy, anarchism*

The Theory: Democracy

Democracy, deriving from the Greek words ‘demos’ = ‘people’ and ‘krates’ = ‘rule’ means “rule by the people.” Thus, democracy entails a form of governance in which the supreme power is vested in the people unlike in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

Although democracy is defined and practiced in many ways, a common feature concerns the participation of the people in the decision-making process, such that power is exercised either directly by the people or through their elected representatives. In the latter case, periodic, free, fair, competitive and inclusive elections assure the consent of the electorate and translate that consent into governmental authority. Elected officials make political decisions, formulate laws, administer services and run the country on behalf and in the interest of the people.

Whatever the mode of governance adopted, “democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Lincoln, 1863).

Democracy is more than just a form of governance. It is a way of life which rests upon the application of ideals and practices committed to the values of respect, cooperation, and compromise. It is based on the appreciation of diversity as “intolerance” hinders “the growth of a true democratic spirit” (Gandhi, 1938) and fundamental rights and freedoms. Civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights “enable individuals to grow and pursue their personal dreams and goals” and participate fully in the political, economic and cultural life of society (Heichel, 2014:para 7). Democracy rests upon the principle of majority rule, minority rights in the acknowledgement that the rights of minorities should not depend upon the good will of the majority. Citizens in a democracy thus do not only possess rights and freedoms, but also hold the responsibility to protect the rights and freedoms of others. Democracy is thus the institutionalisation of freedom.

Dictatorial regimes tend to be characterised by the concentration or total exercise of political power by the state which regulates every aspect of public and private life. Democracies in contrast guard against all-powerful central governments through decentralisation of power. Indeed, an important feature of a democracy is pluralism, where the state is only one actor amongst several varied stakeholders. Pluralism implies that such entities should not depend upon government for their existence and legitimacy, unlike in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes where they would be strictly controlled and monitored.

In a dictatorial regime, the law is simply the will of the ruler. Democracies, in contrast, are based on the principle of the rule of law. Democratic governments exercise authority by way of the law and are themselves subject to the law. Constitutionalism defines limits on the power of government to provide for checks and balances and prevent potential abuse and tyranny. Power is divided through legislative authorities which enact the law, executive authorities which implement it and the judiciary which addresses violations. In a strong democracy, all levels of government must be accessible and responsive to the people.

Citizenship participation is vital “for democracy to be viable and meaningful” (Dalton, 1988:35). While, voting is “the first and smallest step” (Gaines, 2005:10), citizens need to be key actors and stakeholders in the policy making process across all levels and spheres of governance since “a democratic system which is void of the active support and involvement of its citizens may face serious problems of legitimacy and ultimately of its own survival” (Lipset, 1963:180).

Dyspraxia: Dictatorship

“That is the theory. But the practice does not meet the theory” (Harman, 2005:para.4). Indeed, the discrepancy between the theoretical ideals of democracy

and the dictatorial practices evident in contemporary societies suggest “more than a simple gap between theory and practice” (Trend, 1996:9) as evinced from the praxis of democratic dictatorship and dictatorial democracy.

Democratic Dictatorship

A democratic dictatorship is a “dictatorship which paints itself as a full-fledged democracy”. It “pretends to be a democracy to its people and to the world” (White, 2016: paras 1-3). Kleptocracy, deriving from the Greek words ‘kleptes’ = ‘thief’ and ‘kratos’ = ‘rule’ refers to administrations which further their own and other elites’ political and economic power through corrupt practices (Lowman, 2016). Dictatorships and kleptocracies are synonymous since dictators “steal from the many and give to a small elite group in exchange for power” (Fuller, 2017: para 4-5) instead of acting for the common good - a sentiment shared by many citizens in ‘democratic democracies’.

In theory, most democracies including Malta, are constitutional democracies; in practice, they form a kleptocratic dictatorship. Corruption and bad governance, nepotism, favouritism and lack of transparency prevail and are ingrained in their political system and culture. Indeed “the perpetual violation of laws, cronyism, nepotism, abuse of public money, and promotion of corrupt practices by our rulers defy all norms of constitutional democracy [and] these undesirable practices are not confined to any particular political party in power” (Huzaima and Haq, 2017:para2). Money power controls electoral campaigns. The party with the largest capital and savvy marketing campaign gets elected and repays its backers through in-kind benefits – tenders, special concessions, licensing and permits. Revolving doors define the appointment of sponsors and lobbyists to key decision-making roles and high-ranking public officials to high-paying jobs within the private industry. Such connections ensure the sustainment of corporate interests in administrative decisions and blur further the distinction between government and the private sector.

Though Malta and other supposedly ‘democratic democracies’ do not contend with Mao Zedong’s China Democratic Dictatorship or the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the democratic process leaves much to be desired. Highly relevant issues of national concern are often partaken without any form of parliamentary discussion, let alone public consultation and participation.

The extent of Malta’s kleptocracy emerges through its economic agenda. A privatisation dogma prevails, manifested through the sale, leasing and contracting out of public assets and services – from basic utilities, telecommunications, financial services and industries (ex: Enemalta, Maltacom, MaltaPost, Mid-Med Bank, Malta Drydocks, Malta Freeport, Air Malta etc) to healthcare provision and graveyards - and the transfer of public land under shady and illegitimate deals - Smart City, Manoel Island, Tigne Point, Portomaso, Fort Chambray, American embassy, Valletta

Waterfront, the American University of Malta, the ITS site, and Marsa race track, to name but a few. This privatisation and divestment process, along with increasing deregulation shows no signs of abatement, resulting in extending private control over civic matters and the appropriation of public assets by the private sector in betrayal of the public interest. This is accompanied by tax and other financial incentives which persistently profit the rich and powerful; at a time when Government debt stands at 46% of the country's GDP (NSO, 2019). Thus, as the rich are becoming richer, the nation state and its people are increasingly becoming indebted and divested of their assets.

What is given to the people is in the form of tokenism – needless to say the meagre increases throughout the years in the minimum wage, social security and retirement pensions, and social protection investment for increasing the adequacy and affordability of housing and utility costs for low income earners; a triviality compared to the increase in the cost of living. Tokenism permeates consultative and participative practices. In theory, such fora offer a valid vehicle for putting forward citizens' views. In practice, they offer a very limited, mild and regulated form of consultation and participation, often through an elitist structured approach which has already gone through various levels of filtered governance justifying an already set agenda based on the quantification of votes and the appeasement of the powerful elite.

The bureaucratisation of civil society demeans its autonomy. The more 'power' and 'recognition' bestowed through 'consultation', co-financing and public-private partnerships, the more civil society is closely monitored and regulated by the state and the more placatory it becomes to the authorities. Such alliances, mellowing down the governmental/non-governmental distinction thus act as a tacit tool to register consent and legitimise praxis, giving an illusory and superficial sense of representation and participation.

Kleptocracy entails a wide ranging long term impact on democracy. Though at "first: life goes on" in spite of rampant administrative corruption and conflicts of interest, "over time, however...there will be "trickle-down corruption", encouraging unethical behavior and venality, such as bribery and tax evasion among the general population through an 'if you can't beat them, join them' effect (Palifka, 2017:para 4).

Representative democracy thus constitutes an oxymoron. It controverts the 'true' meaning of democracy – rule by the people. It corrupts this fundamental principle by taking the power from the people and giving it to the rulers – in the process disempowering the people and empowering political-administrators and the powerful elite. Representative democracy undermines the majority rule/minority rights principle, the rule of law and ideals of pluralism and equitable and inclusive representation. Representation becomes tokenism, human rights a privilege, and freedom, the choice between a corrupt kleptocratic party over another kleptocratic party – constantly a choice of the lesser evil.

Dictatorial Democracy

Globalisation has transformed the world into a global village through the shrinkage of geographical distance and increased economic, political, social and cultural interdependence. As a result, we are increasingly thinking in terms of both problems and solutions, in global terms (Robertson, 1992). Globalisation offers many opportunities. However, these opportunities and benefits are not equally shared driving prosperity in the minority part and poverty in the majority part of the world.

70% of all international trade (worth \$10 million a minute) is controlled by multinationals, the assets of which are larger than most nations (Sklaire, 2002). Out of the 100 largest economies, 51 are corporations while 49 are countries. The assets of the top 200 corporations equate to the combined economies of 182 nations and double that of 80% of all humanity (Global Policy Forum, 2000).

Global financial transactions facilitate embezzlement and money laundering. Around 5% of the world's GDP is laundered money while illicit cross-border financial flow amounts up to \$1.6 trillion annually (Duffy and Sibley, 2017). Transnational corporations deposit their assets in low or no tax jurisdictions and their losses in high-tax ones, evading law and contributions (Vanbergen, 2016). Kleptocracy and corporatocracy are inextricable since while "kleptocracy...is the dark side of globalisation. Offshore finance is what made it possible" (Bullough, 2018: para 3).

Through "a relentless process of influence-peddling" (West, 2017: para 28), corporate lobbyists pose a huge influence on the international agenda. This is evident through global trade 'agreements' such as the Trans Pacific Partnership and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, through which corporations are enabled to bypass and trespass national legislation. Nation states are increasingly subjected to corporate domination, in the process losing out on self-governance as sovereignty is enslaved by corporate interests. A new form of neo-colonialism has emerged as poor nation states become dependent and controlled through oppressive and exploitative practices by TNCs, while profits reaped are generated back into the economy of rich countries. The United Nations, supposedly a key advocate and guardian of democracy and sustainable development has become corrupted by this corporate agenda, as evidenced from the 'Global Compact' initiative.

Corporate governance self-perpetuates conglomerate power - through mergers, 147 companies control 40% of all global trade (Vitali, Glattfelder and Battiston, 2011) - in the process hindering competition and pushing smaller businesses and people to the margins. Indeed, "rising inequality has accompanied the march towards corporatoracy" (West, 2017: para 28).

An imperialist world order has emerged, dominated by multinational corporations and promoted by supranational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation. Decisions are not partaken by sovereign nation states elected 'democratically' by the people but by corporations which are accountable to no one. The sovereign nation state, the progeny of

democracy, is becoming obsolete as corporate interests undermine self-governance and the rule of law. Capitalism is the echelon of well-being, the warranty of rights and freedoms. Profit is the 'new' politics, global capitalism, the 'new' democracy.

Malta is no exception. It forms another player in this web of neoliberal free market global economy, interchangeably ruled by supranational bodies and fed through transnational corporations. Multinationals are the order of the day as local small businesses are increasingly being engulfed and pushed out by big companies. Ethical business is a thing of the past as Malta embarks and profits from the proceeds of the gaming industry, financial services companies, exploitative and precarious work by asylum seekers and immigrants, and gentlemen's clubs and massage parlours. Human trafficking abounds while citizenship is a commodity 'by investment' in spite of "security, money-laundering and corruption risk" (Borg, 2019).

Legislators seem unable or rather unwilling to address this state of affairs as Malta's economy, social, and moral fabric is shaped and partaken by such global forces. Economic growth overrules social and environmental wellbeing in the face of a skyrocketing estate market and environmental degradation by the construction industry. GDP does not ripple down as it accrues in the hands of the minority while the populace finds it increasingly harder to cope with everyday life expenses, albeit the country's transmutation into a concrete jungle of luxurious apartments and commercial complexes.

Democratic capitalism constitutes an oxymoron. Global capitalism corrupts the democratic system by glorifying competition and profit; it overrides the sovereign national state, the rule of law and through monopolisation and concentration of power, equality and pluralism. Fundamental socio-economic and cultural rights - education, healthcare, social security - become a privilege, increasingly dependent on private insurance and bank credit.

Current discourses of democracy shrouded in ideals of individual freedoms, pluralism, development, meritocracy and competition promote this neo-liberal supremacy, by which Western countries "own the term and use it to police or discipline" those not meeting these criteria (Dhaliwal, 1996:50). The forces of consumption (Baudrillard, 1972) generate obedience and consent through false needs (Marcuse, 1964) as we are brainwashed by the commodification of capitalist society, while democracy becomes the "freedom to choose between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, Levis and Nike, BBC or CNN, McDonald's and Pizza Hut" (Aissaoui, 1999:19). The right to vote becomes the right to buy, as citizens become customers and consumers.

Despite the hegemonic success of this corporatocratic regime, we all have a feeling that something is not quite right...we know a slow motion coup d'état is taking place by transnational organisations facilitated by our political leaders. The incontrovertible proof stares at us in the face every day with wave after wave of financial, economic, social and ecological crisis.

(Vanbergen, 2016:para 2)

Indeed, as democracy transmutes “from farce to tragedy” (Vanbergen, 2016:para 32) through the totalitarianism rule of the global capitalism, it has become another ‘fetishised’ commodity (Baudrillard, 1998), sold and bought as democracy, consumed as dictatorship.

Eupraxia: Anarchism

“Is democracy dying, or perhaps already dead? Is it really time to eulogise democracy, or are we rather on the cusp of a new phase in its long and varied life?” (Gagnon, 2018: para. 5) What, if any, should be the antidote to address the existing discrepancy between democratic theory and dictatorial practice?

‘True’ democracy entails rule by the people. Yet, this “literal Greek meaning...is hopelessly nostalgic, dangerously utopian, anti-modern, [and] anti-liberal” (Euben, 1996:63) such that, it is not ideal to go “back to a pre-modern concept of the political” (Mouffe, 1992:5).

In a ‘true’ democracy, the political system should respond and be held accountable to the people. The ‘antidote’ to democracy’s crisis of meaning is indeed that of giving “citizenry as a whole a clearer voice in the public policy process” (Program for Public Consultation, 2016:para 7).

In a participatory democracy, decision-making is decentralised, non-hierarchical and consensus oriented. It entails a process of collective decision-making where citizens decide on policy proposals and politicians assume the role of policy implementation, thus overcoming the shortcomings of representative democracy by combining it with elements of direct democracy. Practices range from consultations which aim to “inform decision-makers of citizens’ views”, co-governance which gives “citizens significant influence over...decision-making” and self-governance which provides the people “agenda-setting and final decision-making power”. The further one moves towards self-governance, the “potential impact of citizens on decision making increases” (Smith, 2006:7).

Participatory practices can be a very powerful and effective tool to decentralise power, empower communities and support ownership and control (Flacks, 1996). Greater transparency in administrative processes, the introduction of more stringent regulations which limit party financing and revolving door influences and the introduction of recall elections to enable “the people to discharge their public servants when the public servants cease to be satisfactory to them” (Wilcox, 1912:169), enhance accountability and restrict state power and abuse.

Malta’s bi-partisan political culture defined by patronage, nepotism and a winner takes-all style of governance dejects good governance. In the recognition of the futility of “dividing small communities by party politics” (Kersell, 1992:298) through a “zero-sum game” (Guinier, 1994:153), the adoption of a “winner-take-some-but-not-all approach” should help in “reconnecting people to their democracy” (Huhne,

2009:327). These reforms substantiate the view that;

Our country needs to respond rapidly to this potential weakening of our democracy. Citizens must be placed in a direct position to influence political decision, which concern them...There must be more accountability in parliament...The powers of scrutiny need to be enhanced. Too much power goes unchecked. The electoral system needs an overhaul so that votes are not wasted. Shifts of power away from the central to the local government level need to be further encouraged. Government should introduce powers for citizens to propose legislation and to launch public inquiries. Donations to parties need to be capped and made transparent.

(MaltaToday, 2006: para 8)

Yet, while reform may temporarily ameliorate the social order, such tokenistic, institutionalised concessions may in effect extend the power of the dictatorship. History demonstrates that dictatorial regimes can only be overthrown by “ceaseless struggles and popular resistances” (Szolucha, 2018: para 2). As democracy is ousted by dictatorial practices, more direct and radical modes of civic expression - albeit in subversive form - offer a more straightforward, visible, inventive and effective way of voicing demands and expressing dissent. Indeed, in the face of gross disregard and misrepresentation, radical action is often the only viable mechanism left for the people to make their voices heard.

In view of the “shared sense that the state will not do and is not doing what needs to be done”, its smallness to “deal with international capitalism” and largeness “for radical democracy”, democratisation entails going beyond the state (Euben, 1996:73). “Re-envisioning of the meaning of and relevance of democratisation -must begin with the fact of globalisation” (Flacks, 1996:112) through a rethinking of the way the “market operates in politics” (Huhne, 2009:38). It demands “efforts by people to protect ways of life, living standards, and other interests from the... ravages of global market forces” (Flacks, 1996:113). Indeed, “for those who refuse to accept liberal democratic capitalism as the end of history”, radical democracy presents the only viable alternative (Mouffe, 1996:19).

Democracy is “aggressively anti-organisational, suspicious of institutional forms and persistently self-transformative” (Euben, 1996:66). It advocates “grassroots politics, diversity, a playful political practice that is not bound by rigid structures but is continually in the process of transformation” (Epstein, 1996:128). It validates the “pluralism” (Mouffe, 1992) and the “multi-level nature of modern governance” (Hay et al., 2008:5) that exist within a “complex moral universe” (Stoker, 2011:141-142). Democracy entails the creation of “new and different political spaces” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 181) and a “recommitment to open and transparent politics” (Flinders and Buller, 2005:28). By presenting a platform through “which ordinary people directly and consciously participate in the exercise of voice”, civil society

locates power “where people’s lives are centered” and demand “control of their history” (Flacks, 1996:104-113). It also “disturb[s] when necessary” (Azzopardi, 2007) since a “culture of passivity and apathy, an obedient and docile citizenry, are not consistent with democracy” (EIU, 2011:30). Indeed, since the “democratic impulse rarely originates in the corridors of power” (Szolucha, 2018: para 1), true democracy demands resistance to and overthrow of existing power relations for establishing a more co-operative voluntary form of self-governance. In essence, “Anarchism is democracy taken seriously” (Abbey, 1988:26).

Theory and Praxis

Liberal representative democracy is a myth: a theoretical fable, a practical failure. The world is ruled by a corporate kleptocracy governed by huge transnational corporations and supported by corrupt administrators. Malta is no exception and acts as a miniature manifestation of this global state of affairs. As in other corporate kleptocracies, periodic ‘free’ and ‘fair’ elections are held to elect representatives to act on behalf of the people while various institutionalised forms of participation give the illusion of representation: “Let the people think they govern and they will be governed” (Penn, 1682:337).

In theory, “democracy thrives on freedom, [while] a dictatorship thrives on oppression” (Heichel, 2014: para 10). In practice, democratic and dictatorial regimes are not mutually exclusive - they converge and coexist under a wide spectrum of ideologies and practices. This fine line is masked by the totalitarian regime of neo liberal capitalism through which the spectra of democratic dictatorships are engulfed within a global dictatorial democracy.

The tyranny of the political elite and the tyranny of capitalism define national and global agendas through the agglomeration of political and economic power. The rich and mighty undermine democracy through money power and ideological discourse, hegemonising democratic dictatorship and dictatorial democracy as the sole and ultimate form of governance – a corporate kleptocracy.

This is the unfortunate reality of democracy in present day societies. Yet, while this “pervasiveness...is emptying the term of its significance...democratic ideals as participatory government and egalitarian politics retain merit” (Trend, 1996: 17). Indeed, this “should not transform us into sceptics about democracy” since history shows that “there is something about democracy worth mobilising for” (El-Wakil, 2018: para 3-4).

Truly, the history of democracy recounts a counter narrative - the ongoing and relentless struggle of people everywhere, mostly the oppressed and exploited, to establish and reassert a more literal meaning of democracy – direct rule by the people through “an endlessly unfolding process of societal, institutional, interpersonal transformation” (Flacks, 1996:104).

Such transformation which aims to resolve the existing disparity between theory and practice “is not realised by efforts to replace one ‘system’ with another” (Flacks, 1996:104). On the other hand, “the cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy” (Mencken, 1926:4).

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Bio-note

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